

Eaton aerospace workers in Iowa reject second contract offer, after company threatens to hire permanent replacements

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Work at Eaton? Contact the WSWS to tell us what you think about the rejected contract proposal and the issues motivating your strike. Comments will be published anonymously.

Last Friday, over 360 striking workers at the Eaton-Cobham Mission Systems manufacturing facility in Davenport, Iowa, rejected a second contract proposal by 97 percent, defying the company's demands that workers accept below-inflation wage increases and increased health care costs. The workers are members of International Association of Machinists (IAM) Locals 388 and 1191.

Significantly, the vote came just a few hours after the company announced that it would begin hiring permanent replacement workers. In a statement, manager Katie Kennedy wrote, "Given the complexity of our products, and the time it takes to train new hires, we will begin taking the necessary steps to hire permanent replacement workers to ensure we can continue to fulfill our customer commitments. It's not a decision we make lightly, and our goal remains to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement with the Union."

The Eaton factory employs nearly 1,000 union and non-union workers altogether, manufacturing supplies for the military and commercial aerospace companies, including air-to-air refueling systems, fuel tanks and other specialized equipment. Eaton, a multinational power systems company with more than 90,000 employees across the world, purchased Cobham Mission Systems last year for \$2.8 billion.

The second overwhelming contract rejection by workers came after a near-unanimous vote by 98 percent to reject the first proposal by the company on February 17, with workers initiating their strike after

midnight the following day. Both offers met none of workers' demands for significantly higher wages, improved health care and retirement packages. Moreover, the second proposed contract changed the length of the contract from three years to five years. Contract talks are not to resume until March 14.

Craig West, a striking employee at the Eaton plant, told local ABC news affiliate WQAD that the first deal would have included raises of just 2.5 percent the first year, and 3 percent increase in both the second and third years. These would amount to cuts in real pay of likely 5 percent or more, given that inflation is running at 7.5 percent, and set to surge still further as a consequence of the increasingly explosive confrontation between the US, its NATO allies and Russia.

Changes to the health care plans would have significantly increased out-of-pocket costs, West said. Workers wanted "cost of living [raises] up front and an option to keep our PPO plan that most of us are already on so we're not gonna go broke trying to provide health care for our families. They took away our PPO plan. So, to not have any plan basically forces us all to accept these high-deductible plans that would just take thousands of dollars out of our pockets."

The second proposal was largely similar to the first, but extended two more years, he added. While the company has begun busing in scabs, he said, opposition to the deal remained a "a pretty unanimous feeling amongst everybody."

The IAM, aware that the company's demands are overwhelmingly opposed by rank-and-file workers, has sought to distance itself from the contract offers. John Herrig, directing business representative for IAM

District 6, who has an annual compensation of \$145,000, said in a statement, “The union’s position regarding supporting an agreement which contains wage increases that are dwarfed by the cost of living and takeaways in health care and retirement are unacceptable to our membership.”

Despite the critical posturing, however, the IAM is keeping workers at Eaton isolated, and has taken no serious moves to counter the company’s efforts to hire replacements, instead promoting illusions that they are nothing but hollow threats. At the same time, the union has remained silent on the broader politics of the struggle workers are engaged in.

Workers at Eaton are striking amid a rapidly accelerating war drive. The US and its NATO allies have seized on Putin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine in order to implement long-prepared plans to economically and even militarily subjugate Russia. The strike by Eaton workers no doubt is seen by the American government as an impediment to the military supply production needed to ramp up the war effort under way in Ukraine.

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party, along with the entirety of the corporate media and substantial sections of the Republican Party, are promoting increasingly frenzied war propaganda, seeking to promote a false “national unity.”

A driving force behind this campaign is the desire by the ruling class to deflect growing class anger. The Biden administration is seeking to make Putin and Russia public enemy number one, pushing aside the burning problems that confront workers, such as inflation, growing inequality and, above all, the catastrophe produced by the political establishment’s response to the pandemic, in which corporate profits have been prioritized over human lives.

The second contract rejection at Eaton, however, is part of a growing mood of militancy among workers at aerospace companies and defense contractors. In Troy, Ohio, some 300 workers at Collins Aerospace, a subsidiary of defense giant Raytheon, were locked out on February 21, after they voted down the company’s “last, best and final offer” by 230 to 37. Workers manufacture wheels and brakes for a number of commercial and military planes, such as the F-16 Fighting Falcon, U-2 Dragon Lady and LM-100J. Such is the sensitivity of the political establishment to any

disruption of the defense industry that Democratic Representative Tim Ryan has called on the company to end the lockout.

Facing growing unrest in the working class, the Biden administration and the Democratic Party are relying ever-more heavily on the pro-corporate trade unions to enforce labor “discipline” in the run-up to war.

The United Steelworkers union (USW) announced the day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine that it had reached a tentative agreement for a new labor contract to prevent a strike by 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers. USW President Tom Conway announced the deal just days after participating in a February 22 virtual meeting with President Biden, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. The Biden administration sees the American oil industry as fundamental to its war preparation, and a walkout could quickly cripple its plans.

Eaton workers can win their demands for increased wages and better health care and retirement, but this requires taking control of the struggle through the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the IAM, and issuing an urgent appeal to mobilize workers throughout the Quad Cities region and around the country in a common fight against both inequality and the danger of a new world war. Such a committee would strive to link up with other sections of workers in struggle, such as striking Minneapolis teachers, locked-out Collins workers, and others, as well as with workers at John Deere workers, where dissatisfaction remains to the sellout contract forced through by the United Auto Workers union last year.



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